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From Common Core to Curriculum: Five Big Ideas

by Jay McTighe & Grant Wiggins

As with most big ideas, the Common Core Standards are in some ways obvious, but can also be prone to misunderstanding. In this article, we highlight potential misconceptions and offer recommendations for designing a coherent curriculum and assessment system.

Careful Reading Required

Ever since the Common Core Standards were first released, we've heard teachers say, "Well, here we go again!" This isn't surprising since a focus on Standards is not new. However, the CCS require more than just minor tweaks to curriculum and instruction. They "...are not intended to simply be new names for old ways of doing business."¹

Unfortunately, when faced with new Standards, teachers often rush to grade level Standards to start planning. After all, isn't that what we're supposed to teach? But while this is understandable, we strongly advise against zeroing in on grade-level Standards *before* carefully examining the goals of the overall documents.

Think of grade level standards as building materials. You wouldn't simply drop off materials at a worksite and have workers "go at it."

Instead, you'd begin with a blueprint – an overall vision of the desired structure. Without this vision to guide construction, workers might create wonderful individual rooms, but the rooms wouldn't necessarily fit within and across floors, much less achieve the desired results.

Remember, the CCS were developed with long-term outcomes in mind, and their components are intended to work together. "The Standards' refers to all elements of the design – the wording of domain headings, cluster headings, and individual statements; the text of the grade level introductions and high school category descriptions; ... The pieces are designed to fit together, and the standards document fits them together, presenting a coherent whole with the connections within grades and the flow of ideas across grades..."²

It's imperative that educators understand this in order to apply the Standards effectively. We recommend that schools schedule time for staff to read and discuss the Standards, beginning with the "front matter" — *not* the grade-level Standards. Reading and discussion should be guided by an essential question: "What are the new distinctions in these Standards and

what do they mean for our practice?" Carefully examine the structure as well as content, studying the table of contents, the organizational structure, the headers, the components, and the Appendices. After a thorough reading, discuss the changing emphases and their implications.

We cannot overemphasize the value of taking time to collaboratively examine the Standards this way! Failure to adjust practices accordingly will result in "same old, same old" teaching with only superficial connections to the Standards – and their promise to enhance student performance will not be realized.

Standards are not Curriculum

A Standard is an outcome, *not* a system to achieve an outcome (curriculum). "These Standards do not dictate curriculum or teaching methods."³ "The Standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach...(standards) must therefore be complemented by a well-developed, content-rich curriculum..."⁴

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So, what is the proper relationship between Standards and curriculum? Standards are like a “building code”. A structure must be designed to meet the needs of the client in a functional and pleasing way – while also meeting the building code. Similarly, while curriculum and instruction must address the Standards, we must always keep the long-term ends in

specific course and grade level curriculum maps are then derived backward from them. Practically speaking, macro level work is best undertaken at the state, regional, or district levels by teams of content experts and experienced teachers. A detailed description of “unpacking” can be found at: http://ARAreading.org/McTigheWiggins_FiveBigIdeas.html

“The Standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach.”

mind – the development of important capabilities in the learner as a result of engaging and effective work. To shift analogies, Standards are more like the ingredients in a recipe than the final meal; more like the rules of the game rather than a strategy for winning the game.

What is a curriculum? In our first book⁵, we uncovered 83 different definitions for “curriculum” in educational literature. Such ambiguity will not support clarity or coherence when translating Standards into curriculum. Worse, most definitions focus on what will be “covered” rather than what learners should be able to accomplish. Marching through a list of topics is unlikely to yield the sophisticated outcomes the Standards envision. The ELA Standards underscore this by framing everything around “anchor standards,” which highlight complex abilities and performances students should master for college and workplace readiness.

Standards must be “Unpacked”

We suggest educators unpack the CCS in four broad categories: Long term Transfer Goals, Overarching Understandings, Overarching Essential Questions, and a set of recurring Cornerstone Tasks.

Categories should initially be unpacked at the “macro” (program) level to establish the equivalent of a curriculum blueprint. More

Backwards Mapping

The key to avoiding fragmented curriculum is to design backward from complex performances that require content. Ralph Tyler made this very point more than 60 years ago: “The purpose of a statement of objectives is to indicate the kinds of changes in the student to be brought about... Hence it is clear that a statement of objectives in terms of content headings... is not a satisfactory basis for guiding the further development of the curriculum.”⁶ Thus the first question for curriculum writers is not: “What will we teach and when should we teach it?” Rather the question must be goal-focused: “Having learned key content, what will students be able to do with it?”

To design curriculum backward from the goal of autonomous transfer requires a deliberate and transparent plan for helping the student rely less and less on teacher hand-holding and scaffolds. After all, transfer is about independent performance in context. You can only be said to have fully understood and applied your learning if you can do it without someone telling you what to do. In the real world, no teacher is there to direct and remind you about which lesson to plug in here or what strategy fits there; transfer is about intelligently and effectively drawing from your repertoire, independently, to han-

dle new situations on your own. Accordingly, we should see an increase, by design, in problem- and project-based learning, small-group inquiries, Socratic Seminars, and independent studies as learners progress through the curriculum across the grades.

Our point here is straightforward: if a curriculum simply marches through lists of content knowledge and skills without attending to the concomitant goal of cultivating independent performance, high-schoolers will remain as dependent on teacher directions and guidance as 4th graders are. The resulting graduates will be totally unprepared for the demands of college and the workplace.

Assessment is Key

Common Core Standards do not simply specify learning goals. They also reflect desired qualities of student work and the rigor of assessments. When we talk about “high standards” in athletics, music, or business, we are referring to the quality of outcomes. The same is true for teaching. Outcomes de-

scribed help make sure local assessments are validly anchored in national criteria.

Appendices A and B are arguably the most important sections of the ELA Standards. There the authors describe the degree of text difficulty students must be able to handle, the features that must be evident in student writing, and the kinds of performance tasks that will provide the needed evidence. Understanding this performance-based conception of the Standards is critical when translating CCS into a robust curriculum and assessment system, and it reflects the essence of backward design.

However, the need to construct curriculum around assessments may lead to a related misunderstanding — the idea that we need to assess each grade-level Standard in isolation. This view may be due in part to the layout of grade-level Standards and the look and feel of traditional standardized tests. But it confuses the means and ends. The authors of the ELA Standards wisely anticipated this misconception and cautioned against

it: “While the Standards delineate specific expectations in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language, each standard need not be a separate focus for instruction and assessment. Often several standards can be addressed by a single rich task.”⁷

In summary, moving from CCS to curriculum requires thoughtful interpretation to avoid the misunderstandings discussed above. Yet building the curriculum backward from worthy tasks offers a viable pathway to the performances envisioned in the Standards. ■

REFERENCES

^{1, 3} National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers (2010). *Common Core State Standards for Mathematics*. Washington, D.C.

² National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers (2012). *K-8 Publishers' Criteria for the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics*. Washington, D.C.

^{4, 7} National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers (2010). *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*. Washington, D.C.

⁵ Wiggins, G. and McTighe, J. (1998) *Understanding by Design*, 1st edition. Alexandria, VA: ASCD

⁶ Tyler, R. (1949) *Basic Principles of Curriculum & Instruction*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Each issue, we feature emerging research of special interest to Arkansas reading teachers. Abstracts of Action Research Studies (conducted by students at Arkansas Universities) are followed by links to full text versions of the same.

The Impact of Explicit Analytic Reading Skills Instruction on Mathematical Problem Solving

by Megan Long

This study examined the effects of analytic reading skills instruction on mathematical problem solving skills in a regular education third-grade classroom. The instruction consisted of teaching students to analytically read a mathematics problem in order to find the purpose, organize information, draw conclusions and then implement a plan to accurately solve the problem. The intervention

consisted of direct teaching and independent application of analytic reading strategies for 50 minutes a day, four days a week, for eight weeks. Released items from ACTAAP and researcher-developed assessment instruments were used before and after intervention. The ACTAAP measured problem solving ability and researcher-created tools measured reading skills and mathematics computation skills separately. Daily scores were collected using a scoring rubric that rated students' ability to understand the problem, plan a solution, and arrive at an accurate response. Pre and post intervention scores were then compared using a paired samples t-test. Results revealed that students' ability to solve mathematical word problems significantly improved. Girls' grew significantly more than boys, but growth for students who spoke English as a second language and native language speakers

were about the same. This study suggests that analytic reading skills instruction may improve students' ability to solve mathematical story problems. ■

The Effects of Instruction through Text Feature Walks on Comprehension of Expository Text

by Cecely Franco

This study examined the effects of instruction through text feature walks on comprehension of expository text in a regular education fifth-grade classroom. Twenty-six students participated in intentional dialogue structured around predictions, questions, and connections related to informational text features. Instruction took place 45 minutes a day, four days a week for eight weeks. The Flynt and Cooter Reading Inventory was used to measure comprehen-



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sion before and after intervention. Daily comprehension scores were collected through students' responses to predictions, questions, connections, and applications. Following instruction, mean scores for the whole class increased significantly. The students' comprehension of expository text grew about the same regardless of gender, native language, or special services received at school. Results suggest that comprehension instruction that focuses on text features improves students' ability to understand text that explains or informs. ■

The Effects of Instruction Incorporating Repeated Reading on Oral Reading Automaticity

by Dorothy Ivey

This purpose of this study was to determine if focused instruction that included students reading passages multiple times improved their ability to read aloud automatically and effortlessly. The research question was "Does repeated reading instruction improve oral reading automaticity in one second-grade class-

room?" The study took place in a second-grade regular education classroom consisting of 21 students. During intervention students engaged in focused instruction for 30-45 minutes a day, four days a week for eight-weeks. Oral reading accuracy was measured with the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills and oral reading automaticity was measured with Zutell and Rasinski's Multidimensional Fluency Scale. Daily scores were taken on automaticity and weekly and bi-weekly accuracy progress monitoring was done using these tools. A paired samples t-test for means was conducted on both oral reading accuracy and automaticity at the conclusion of the study. Sub-skill scores of automaticity measured by the Multidimensional Fluency Scale increased significantly. Students' accuracy measured by DIBLES improved notably, but not significantly. Analyzing both aspects, 95 percent of student scores improved. This study suggests that focused instruction requiring repeated reading of text improves students oral reading automaticity. ■

Full text versions of these action research studies can be found at: http://arareading.org/the_reader_81.html

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